

TREKKING UTAH

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The canyons,
plateaus and
monoliths of Utah
have been described
as one of America's
great adventure
playgrounds. But
would Richard
Hanson agree?

Adventure CENTRAL U.S.A.



IMMORTALISED IN COUNTLESS FILMS, CAR COMMERCIALS AND CIGARETTE ADS, AMERICA'S DESERT SOUTHWEST HAS ALWAYS BEEN HIGH ON MY LIST OF PLACES TO VISIT BEFORE I DIE. I CAN'T QUITE PUT MY FINGER ON EXACTLY WHAT DREW ME TO THIS SOMETIMES BARREN AND DESOLATE LAND. MAYBE IT'S THE WIDE OPEN SPACES AND INSPIRING RED ROCK FORMATIONS OR PERHAPS IT'S THE WHOLE COWBOYS AND INDIANS THING FROM WHEN I WAS A KID.

After a crazy night enjoying the bright lights of Las Vegas, I find myself heading out into the wilderness with a dozen complete strangers. Having not done too many group tours before, I'm hoping our local American guide will get us off the busy tourist trail into a few secret spots and I'm looking forward to sharing a few adventures and making new friends around the campfire at night.

The anticipation builds as we pass through mile after mile of parched pan-flat landscapes and slowly climb through Ponderosa pine forests. The Kaibab Plateau rises to over 5,000ft, giving way to one of the greatest spectacles on earth, the Grand

Canyon. Even after all the inevitable hype, the views across 16 miles of twisted sandstone and granite formations carved over a mile into the earth do not disappoint.

Entering the state of Utah, giant red monoliths dominate the horizon and tower over the desert floor. But only once we draw near to the entrance of Monument Valley does the summit of Rain God Mesa reveal its true gigantic scale surrounded by other spectacular buttes and spires. A Navajo guided jeep tour teaches us more about the history and culture of the Native Americans who have called this sacred land home for countless generations.

Next day, crossing over the muddy and wild San Juan River we enter the town of Mexican Hat, aptly named after a balancing rock formation with a striking resemblance to a giant sombrero. Here we meet Betty and Rusty, our hosts at a very rustic cowboy camp precariously perched between towering cliffs and the raging river below. Saddled up and briefed on the art of horsemanship, we set off on a two-hour trail ride through slot canyons and ancient riverbeds. Only now do I realise that all red rock and sandstone is not the same. In fact,

no red rock and sandstone is the same, that's the beauty of Utah.

The evening is accompanied by the smell of 'biscuits & beans' baked in a traditional Dutch oven and gigantic steaks cooked over an open fire. After an awkward introduction to line dancing and a few pulls of whiskey, we slowly break up and make our way to bed wishing the night would never end. Wanting the moment to last, I forsake my tent for an evening under the stars. As I lie on my back gazing up at the pitch-black sky and a zillion pricks of light, I slowly drift off to the sound of a crackling campfire and coyotes howling in the distance.

We re-enter the 21st Century on our approach to Moab, the 'Adventure Capital' of Utah. Whether it's mountain biking the world famous Slickrock Trail, rafting down rapids on the Colorado River's Cataract Canyon or just hiking miles of trail through Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, Moab ticks all the boxes.

After setting up camp, we head off on a magical mystery tour of Canyonlands National Park which doubles as a designated Recreation Area allowing access and activities that would be unthinkable at the Grand Canyon. Our next few days include a 4WD Hummer tour over the rolling slickrock formations which were once an ancient seabed and we manage to escape the heat of the day on a scenic float trip down the meandering Colorado River, so deep and wide at this point that there

isn't a ripple of white water. Though a little disappointed at the lack of action, I enjoy the different perspective offered by slowly drifting below the canyon walls.

But my most memorable experience of all is our guided mountain biking ride down the Gemini Bridges Trail. Here we are shuttled up to the trailhead at 4,700ft for the 13-mile, 1,000ft descent over rugged and stunningly beautiful terrain.

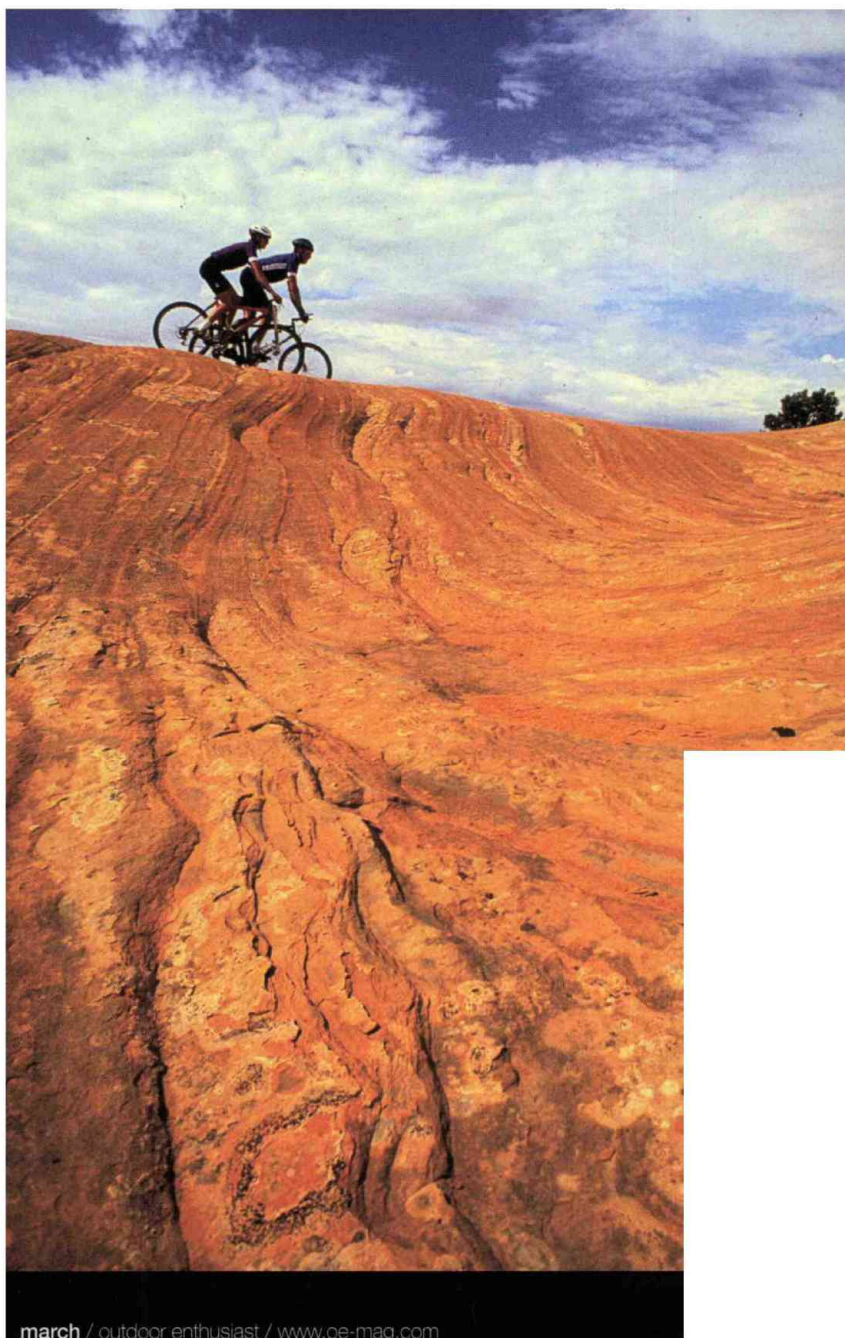
Our last evening in Moab is spent exploring Arches National Park and hiking up to the iconic Delicate Arch, a rock

formation that symbolises the eerie geological features of Utah. With the sun setting across the park, the landscape is all crimson hues and shadows, conjuring up psychedelic images of Salvador Dali paintings and melting clocks. On the drive to Bryce Canyon National Park next day, we pass through Capitol Reef National Park and along Highway 12. From baked desert plains to fertile river gorges, towering cliffs and rolling slickrock, the views change with every bend in the road. In fact, Bryce Canyon is not a canyon at all but a hillside

that has been eroded by millennia of water, wind and ice, leaving behind thousands of red, orange and gold sandstone towers or 'hoodoos' as they are more commonly known. At over 8,000ft, the air is cool and smells of pine, a welcome relief from the blistering summer heat of the previous days.

Our final stop is the desert oasis of Zion National Park. Once again, a change in landscape and scenery gives way to a relatively narrow gorge 2,000ft deep and only a few miles long. Protected by the desert further south and fed by the Virgin River from the north, Zion Canyon offers a welcome reprieve from the surrounding terrain. Waterfalls spring from the rocky cliffs, creating hanging gardens and dazzling spectacles of light.

Some of our group choose to hike up 'The Narrows', wading knee-deep through the Virgin River Gorge, while I join the others in their ascent to Angels Landing, a towering monolith and centrepiece of the canyon floor. After a quick - though technically challenging - climb we reach the summit for a 360-degree panoramic view, and the ultimate finale to what has been a truly incredible adventure. After all this, it is certainly hard not to agree that Utah is indeed one of America's great adventure playgrounds!



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